

Review of *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* by Eric A. Stanley (Duke University Press)

by [Kerry Keith](#) | [Issue 11.2 \(Fall 2022\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

ABSTRACT Eric A. Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* delves into the spectacle and disappearance that racialized anti-trans/queer violence produces. Stanley's method is archival. By putting surveillance tapes, letters, films, and direct actions side by side, they trace structuring logics of modernity while emphasizing trans/queer practices that have and do escape such violent worlds. While this book underscores violence, hurt, and loss, it is more accurate to classify it as a text that tenaciously holds onto the possibility of livable worlds otherwise.

KEYWORDS [violence](#), [surveillance](#), [queer](#), [race](#), [trans studies](#)

Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable. By Eric A. Stanley. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2021. 184 pp. (paperback). ISBN:978-1-4780-1421-8. US List \$24.95

Eric A. Stanley's *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* delves into the spectacle and disappearance that racialized anti-trans/queer violence produces. Violence does not have a singular meaning in the text, as it sometimes appears as a "force that ends life" and sometimes as "the only way life may unfold" (7). Violence is an undoing; the subtitle's "structuring antagonism" refers to the ways that such undoing occurs at the level of lives subject to violent events. At the same time, the book unpacks how undoing can be leveraged towards unraveling modernity's oppressive structures.

In a move that will be unsurprising to readers familiar with their writings, Stanley denounces the state as the primary vehicle for recognition, inclusion, and safety. Instead, their meditation on racialized and gendered violence posits how the foundational "inconsistencies" of liberal democracy steadies its hold (11). The apprehending power of

liberal rights only further valorizes the United States' socio-legal structure that perpetuates by rendering certain lives unlivable. While this book underscores violence, hurt, and loss, it is more accurate to classify it as a text that tenaciously dwells in the possibility of livable worlds otherwise.

Stanley's atmospheric analysis—the structures and molecules that envelop trans/queer life—enables them to illuminate diffuse scenes of simultaneous trans/queer presence and erasure. Stanley draws from archives of anti-trans/queer violence that traverse a range of times and places in the US. They attend to objects such as letters, films, direct actions, and surveillance tapes to produce a cadence of anti-trans/queer violence and the “ungovernable,” a legal designation which Stanley redefines as an analytics and ability to escape or evade state surveillance and capture. Stanley tethers their theoretical interventions to Frantz Fanon's corpus by emphasizing that violence structures the here and now, and by embracing the destructive as a means to lay ground for radical changes. Engaging Fanon's insights for trans/queer theory, Stanley urges a move away from recognition within liberal democracy towards more livable existences, and—to quote Fanon—to grasp that “the real *leap* consists of introducing invention into life” in service of abolitionist worlds to come.¹

Across its four chapters, *Atmospheres of Violence* deliberately recounts violent scenes asserting a refusal to look away. Stanley is clear that the point of narrating such scenes is to ensure they do not repeat. The first chapter questions how instances of racialized anti-trans/queer “overkill”—the brutalization of a body beyond the point of death—indicates an expression of ontological nonexistence. Following Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Stanley points out that there is no self/Other battle in the deadly scenes depicted, but that such excessive violence structures how “specific bodies in specific times” take the place of being nothing (39). Furthermore, because the deaths depicted in this chapter are caused and/or exacerbated by the police, the state itself produces anti-trans/queer atmospheric violence and, as such, can never be an antidote to it.

The second chapter shifts from the overt violence of overkill to the biocapital of blood by questioning its exchanges, extractions, and exclusions for queer folks. Stanley emphasizes how blood operates as a site of accumulation under the logics of racial capitalism and colonial occupation, where value, commodified life, and dead labor is produced by venipuncture. Biocapital, and its attendant racialized and sexualized production of difference, is made all the more salient as Gilead Sciences, the sole producer of the HIV prophylactic medication PrEP in the US, profits from an “abstracted consumer to come” (61). This abstraction takes place in material anti-trans and racist economic barriers which prohibit access to PrEP for many, particularly trans people of color.

The third chapter examines the scopical regimes of surveillance tapes, filmic representations, and the potential of opacity as a way of seeing. Stanley's own experience as a filmmaker, and their insights on representation (as also evidenced in the anthology *Trap Door* they coedited) shines through in this chapter. Guiding the reader through the CCTV taped police beating of Duanna Johnson, a black trans woman, in a Memphis county jail intake room, Stanley discusses the edges, frames, gazes, omissions, and assumptions of this video capture. In contrast to optical capture, Stanley concludes the chapter by reading Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel's film, *Happy Birthday Marsha*, as disengaging from a cis gaze and embracing Eduard Glissant's theory of opacity.

The fourth chapter carefully discusses suicide in atmospheres of violence (94). Stanley dislodges queer/trans suicide from individualizing pathologies in order to situate suicide not only in terms of survival that is unbearable, but in terms of a world engulfed in violence that is unlivable. Putting a teen's last letter into conversation with cell phone video testimonies smuggled out of a Georgia prison, Stanley comments on the torture of living and suffocating in violence. An end to this torture is met in the act of self-negation when one pulls the world down too.

Finally, the book's coda delves into what it means to be a body of—and to embody—ungovernability. The ungovernable refuse the state, in its logics and exposures, through abolitionist "improvisational practice" (121). Stanley highlights this through an abbreviated biography of Miss Major, a Black trans activist who was instrumental in San Francisco in the 1990s in providing street-level health care services and gender-affirming community to those looking for family. Miss Major's radical care work, life on the move, and welcoming laugh embody ungovernable persistence.

This book is best read with deep breaths and frequent pauses. Its heavy scenes, acknowledged absences, and careful diction make it so readers are not merely comprehending context and argument, but are confronted with the visceral. By slowing the reading process, the weight of Stanley's words linger. It is in this pause—this care—that abolitionist consciousness finds shelter. Stanley's repetitive use of plural first person pronouns throughout the text function as its own kind of queer subjectivation. If we readers understand these pronouns as not purely descriptive, but as doing the discursive-political work that pronouns always undertake, then the book is a call to activation. We inherit and inhabit the responsibility of shepherding in trans/queer ungovernable worlds. A remarkable contribution to queer theory, an imperative analytic for abolitionist praxis, and a poignant testament to enduring the present world in service of destroying the present world, *Atmospheres of Violence* is a vital text for those who look, labor, and long for livable lives on the horizon.

Notes

1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 204. ↩
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